MARK TWAIN and the RUSSIANS

An Exchange of Views

CHARLES NEIDER

An American Century Special 50¢

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and
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Publisher's Note

THIS EXCHANGE of letters between the distinguished American critic Charles Neider and Y. Bereznitsky, editor of the official Soviet publication *Literary Gazette,* constitutes a fascinating critical discussion of Mark Twain. But even more important it represents a significant "breakthrough" in Soviet American cultural relations. The publication of Charles Neider's reply in the *Literary Gazette* marks the first time a Soviet literary journal has published the uncensored comments of an American writer who has been attacked in its pages. It is to be hoped that this is only the first of many such literary exchanges.

From time to time we plan to publish similar short, timely material pertaining to the American literary scene as American Century Specials. The reader will find at the back of this pamphlet a description of the 31 titles in the American Century Series, a basic paperback library of American literary and historical writings.

Charles Neider has written the Introduction to the new American Century Series edition of Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.*

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Introduction

On August 18, 1959, the Moscow *Literary Gazette,* known in the Soviet Union as *Literaturnaya Gazeta,* published a criticism of my edition of *The Autobiography of Mark Twain.* This criticism came to my attention in the fourth week of September. The gist of it was that America has an official line on Mark Twain, that the nation tries to suppress or forget him, that his editors have followed the line carefully, and that I have been the worst offender in this respect.

Since I had been dealing with materials in my own language and had had access to the original manuscripts and typescripts, and since my volume had enjoyed a certain critical success in my own country (all these facts were available to the Russian critic), it seemed to me that the writer's self-confidence was presumptuous. Still, I was encountering the official Soviet literary line regarding America (the *Literary Gazette* is the official newspaper of the Union of Writers in the U.S.S.R.) and so I was not entirely surprised by the content of the criticism or by its harsh and self-righteous tone.

Normally I do not reply to criticisms of my books. This particular one, however, offered a special and complex challenge. It was obviously "protected"; it struck through me at the society of which I am a part; and it seemed to discount the possibility of free literary endeavor in my country. Consequently I decided to take some action to bring my views to the attention of those readers who had been exposed to the article defaming me. It seemed a quixotic enough hope, in view of the fact that no rebuttal by an American in the *Literary Gazette* was on record. I did not think I stood much chance of receiving favorable treatment from the editors of the *Literary Gazette.* But Premier Khrushchev had recently made his visit to the United States and was in an expansive mood, and so I applied

directly to him. On October 13th I sent him a two-sentence letter in which I said in part, "In the interest of cultural relations between our two nations, will you please ask the *Literary Gazette* to open its pages to me for a reply?"

Being uncertain what it cost to send an airmail letter to Moscow, I had to experience the embarrassment of taking my letter to the post office (I had to go there anyway), where I hoped that the clerk would not notice the name on the envelope. He did notice it, however. "What? Khruschchev? Are you crazy?" he exclaimed. I couldn't blame him.

I did not hear from Khrushchev, but on November 16th I received a letter from the foreign editor of the *Literary Gazette*. The letter, dated November 9th, was brief: "We received your letter and although we have no reason to change our opinion about your book, we shall gladly open our pages to you for a statement on the subject." On November 17th I wrote and airmailed my reply, with the notation that the reply had to be published as a whole or not at all.

An invitation to an American to reply to an attack in a Soviet literary journal—in this case the official literary journal—was so unusual that it merited front-page stories in the *New York Times* and the *New York Herald Tribune* of November 18th. The *Tribune* ran an editorial on the subject, and the *New York Post* published a "closeup" of the exchange. The AP and the UPI sent the story and its sequel over their national wires. All of which, of course, was not a commentary on me but on the nature of relations between the Soviet Union and the United States.

The *Literary Gazette* published my reply in its issue of December 12th, together with a new criticism by its correspondent, the new criticism being almost twice the length of my reply. Again the controversy made news in the United States. The second criticism was notably different in tone from the first. Its tone could almost be described as reasonable. Far from being impersonal, the article was couched in the form of an open letter to me. And it even contained remarks complimentary to me. I promptly airmailed a reply to this second criticism and exactly eight weeks later received an airmail reply from the foreign editor of the *Literary Gazette*

with the following explanation: "It seems that you and Mr. Bereznitsky expressed your views about Mark Twain and his works in full. That is why we do not consider it necessary to continue this discussion any longer."

Because of the interest which the controversy has aroused in the United States and because the documents in the case have not been seen here, it seems worth making them available to the public, particularly when Mark Twain is enjoying a revival of popularity at home. The timing is especially apt, for 1960 contains two significant dates in the history of Mark Twain literature: the 50th anniversary of his death (April 21) and the 125th anniversary of his birth (November 30).

These recent criticisms in the *Literary Gazette* are of course not isolated ones, nor are they new. The attacks follow an old Soviet line on Mark Twain, which consists in general of this: Mark Twain is of primary significance as a social and political observer; his objects of attack are chiefly aspects of the American scene; and the United States officially and unofficially suppresses or distorts his attacks against itself. This notion of America's being a monolithic structure, with control stemming from the top, naturally strikes most Americans as a curious one.

Even more curious, perhaps, is the way in which Soviet literary spokesmen view us as if we were a mirror image of themselves, and this despite their protestation that we are so different from them. *They* live under an official line and under censorship; *they* are primarily social and political critics; and it follows that we closely resemble them. One wonders what the mass of Soviet readers think. Can they digest the official line? And are they as humorless as their literary spokesmen often give the impression of being? I like to believe that they are not, and that Mark Twain's great popularity among them is an indication not so much that the official line has been getting through as that Mark Twain has. That he is very popular among them is indicated by some recent statistics published in the *Literary Gazette*. There have been 250 printings of Twain's works in 25 languages of the Soviet Union, with a distribution of

about 11,000,000 copies. A twelve-volume edition of his collected works is now being prepared.

Mark Twain is of course primarily a humorist. If he had never possessed his humorous gift, if he had only written his social criticisms, he would not now be read by millions of Russian readers and it would be useless for Soviet literary spokesmen to point to him as the great critic of democratic morals. He is also of course primarily a writer of fiction. It was through these two great gifts that he made the reputation which is so well sustained fifty years after his death. His American readers on the whole have no difficulty in comprehending this simple fact, and I like to think that most Russian readers have the same common sense, that they read him basically not for the lessons he teaches of the inherent "evils" of the nation across the Iron Curtain but because he enlarges their lives imaginatively through a flow of pleasure. Great humor, after all, being so rare, is a very exportable commodity. When blended with wisdom and humanitarianism it is irresistible.

If one were exposed only to the official Soviet view one might think that Mark Twain spent most of his time in attacking aspects of his own country. If he did not write much concerning his love of his country it was not only because professed patriotism embarrassed him, it was also and chiefly because love of his country was implicit in all he wrote. He was, after all, *the* American writer close to the native soil; and *the* American writer who in *Innocents Abroad* forever put out of fashion the literary habit of fawning on Europe while finding no worth back home. In both of these respects, by the way, he resembles Dostoyevsky, just as his opposite number, Henry James, resembles Turgenev the Francophile. Among the great American writers of his period he was the most representative, at a time when it was already fashionable to expatriate oneself in Europe.

From the way official Soviet critics sometimes speak of him, one might imagine that if he were alive today he would be delighted to take up permanent residence in Moscow. If he were unpredictable enough to do such a thing he would soon complain of the quality of the borsht there. It is not the sort of borsht they served up in Missouri or Nevada or California in his day—or even in Connecti-

cut and New York. And he would be instructed forcefully that criticizing Moscow borsht is strictly forbidden in the Soviet Union —a lesson which Boris Pasternak recently learned to his sorrow.

Mark Twain is useful to the Soviet spokesmen—and to most Americans as well—as a critic of certain aspects of American life. What the spokesmen fail to acknowledge is that his criticism of America was a department of a larger criticism, his criticism of man, and that under that heading he would now be criticizing the Russian form of government as well as various lapses in the American way of life.

The fact is of course that Americans are better prepared to admire and value self-criticism than the citizens of a nation which still remains an autocracy. Democracy for all its shortcomings prizes self-criticism as it cannot be prized in an autocracy, inasmuch as democracy flourishes under self-criticism, whereas an autocracy dies by it.

CHARLES NEIDER

New York
January 23, 1960

POSTSCRIPT

ON RETURNING HOME from Bermuda on March 18, I found in my mail a curious item. It was a humorous appendage to my little affair with the *Literary Gazette* and assumed the form of a treasurer's check for $49 drawn on the Morgan Guaranty Trust Company of New York by order of the Bank for Foreign Trade of the U.S.S.R. in Moscow. Under the amount of the check there was an explanation: "B/O Redaktzia Literaturnoi Gazety—Author's Fee." Both *The New York Times* and *The New York Herald Tribune* published stories about this check on March 20, for it is well known that literary dollars rarely leave the Soviet Union.

I made the following statement to *The New York Times:* "It is an interesting experience to be paid for defending myself against an attack, and for attacking a critic of the *Literary Gazette*. In the United States it is not the custom to pay for letters to the editor. Whether it is the custom to do so in the Soviet Union I do not

know, but I heartily approve of the practice in this instance. I appreciate the desire of the *Literary Gazette* to show its good will toward me as a representative of American writers and editors in this cultural exchange."

As the newspapers reported, I shall spend the $49 on paperback editions of the works of contemporary writers whom I think the Russians are not too familiar with, and shall send the books to the *Literary Gazette*.

C. N.

New York
March 20, 1960

*Mark Twain on the Bed of Procrustes**

SHORTLY BEFORE the opening of the American exhibit in Moscow, the correspondents of the *Literary Gazette* who were getting acquainted with its proposed exposition were amazed to notice that among the books selected for display at the exhibit there were neither any new editions of the works of Mark Twain nor any interesting new publications about his works. Obviously the organizers of the exhibit caught themselves in time, and recently on one of the bookshelves in the Sokolniki [Park] there stood *The Autobiography of Mark Twain,* newly edited in New York.

Still, that initial forgetfulness expresses fairly accurately the relationship of official America to its greatest writer. They try to forget him. And if they have to take notice of him anyway, then in that case everything possible is done to crop the great writer's hair, to deflower the blazing and furious colors of his satire, to eat away the socially unmasking resonance of Twain's work and, in the last analysis, to make him up as a benevolent and simple-minded scoffer. The new edition of the *Autobiography* is the logical fruit of these efforts at literary hairdressing.

Here before us is this beautifully published, weighty volume. The dust jacket again and again invites us to note that "in the present volume Mark Twain's autobiographical notes are fully assembled for the first time."

But when you open "the present volume" and begin to familiarize yourself with its contents, it becomes clear that both the thunderous advertising preceding its appearance and the come-on information supplied by the dust jacket—all that is no more than a beautifully daubed-up label.

Unlike his two predecessors, the editor of the new edition, Charles Neider, tried to observe the principle of the chronological

*From *Literaturnaya Gazeta,* Moscow, August 18, 1959, p. 4.

sequence of events in his disposition of materials. But the trouble is that the really autobiographical element occupies a rather minor place in Twain's notes. To put all the wealth of their content into the Procrustean bed of chronological sequence is a task of incredible difficulty.

Procrustes, as is well known, either stretched his victim to the desired length or else cut off those parts of the body which seemed superfluous to him. Charles Neider uses both methods. On the one hand, he actually introduces into the volume he has edited several items which had no place in previous editions. On the other hand, he excludes from it a large part of the material which went into the editions of 1924 and especially of 1940; moreover, the principle upon which he bases his selection is so interesting that it is fitting to discuss it more fully.

Who does not know Twain's famous pronouncements about American "democracy," his indignant notes about the predatory wars which the United States carried on half a century ago, his satirical sketches, cutting as a slap in the face, of the oil king, Rockefeller, Senator Clark, General Wood, President Theodore Roosevelt, and other knights and henchmen of American expansionism. All these materials (except for an insignificant part which came out in the 1924 edition) came out in the 1940 edition. True, even then an effort was made to soften Twain's more than unambiguous remarks about the bosses of political life in the America of his time. Bernard DeVoto, the editor of that edition, expressed, in part, a naïve amazement that Mark Twain, who had once called himself "an unwashed son of labor," could not accept in Rockefeller and T. Roosevelt fellow "sons of labor." But the debunking voice of Mark Twain cuts through the most stifling editorial comments. In 1959 Charles Neider found the precautions of his predecessors insufficient, and he decided without superfluous ceremony to "shut Twain's trap," blotting out from his edition all the notes mentioned above. This is a supreme example of scholarly ill faith and of that very political tendentiousness whose pretended absence certain American men of letters so love to boast on occasion.

As to previously unpublished materials, Neider resolved to introduce into his edition Twain's meditations on baldness, on the value

of hair-washing, on beginning writers, on phrenology, on honorary degrees, etc. It is naturally hard to say anything against the inclusion of these notes in *The Autobiography of Mark Twain.* But it is no less hard to come to terms with the idea that these few, inoffensive trifles are called upon to replace the brilliant, angry pages of the original, unprocessed Twain, which are many times superior to them in scope and significance. It is plain that the bitter prophecy which Twain made in the midst of work on his Autobiography in a letter to William Dean Howells is coming true:

"Tomorrow I mean to dictate a chapter which will get my heirs and assigns burned alive if they venture to print it this side of A.D. 2006—which I judge they won't. There'll be lots of such chapters if I live 3 or 4 years longer. The edition of A.D. 2006 will make a stir when it comes out. I shall be hovering around taking notice, along with other dead pals. You are invited."

Not very happy lines. And although there remains almost a half century till the time Twain mentioned, it would hardly have pleased him to watch how the editor of an eviscerated and washed-out edition of his Autobiography tries to put forth his crime as a virtue and does not burn alive for shame at that. Literally, "virtue." This is how he expresses it: "My volume," writes Neider in his Introduction, "is to a high degree anecdotic, but I believe this to be a virtue rather than a defect, in that it correctly represents the creative slant of Mark Twain's mind."

An anecdote. Fine and dandy. And though this anecdote is far from young, it grows none the less sad for that, none the less exacerbating to the memory of the greatest American writer.

Y. Bereznitsky

(Translated by Robert L. Belknap)

[*Reply*]*

On August 18th the *Literary Gazette* published a rather severe criticism of the so-called American attitude toward Mark Twain, as well as of my editing of the recently published *Autobiography*

*From *Literaturnaya Gazeta, Moscow, December* 12, 1959, p. 4.

of Mark Twain. I should like to say a few words about this criticism, which was signed by Y. Bereznitsky.

The criticism described "the relationship of official America to its greatest writer" by saying, "They try to forget him." I find it difficult to read this without a wry smile. For the fact is that "official" America does well to "forget" Mark Twain, inasmuch as our readers would make it quite hot for our officials if the latter dared to interfere either to make us remember or to forget any author. Far from forgetting Mark Twain, America—official and unofficial—is currently enjoying a fresh outburst of interest in him. One of the great successes of the last theatrical season in New York was the impersonation of Mark Twain by the young actor, Hal Holbrook, with an evening of readings from Twain's works. Holbrook is now touring the country with his impersonation and readings. A recent issue of the very popular *Life* magazine devoted an article to the subject of Holbrook and Twain. A new motion picture is currently being made of *Huckleberry Finn.* And numerous books by and about Twain are appearing. One of these is a collection of Holbrook's readings, which will be published late in November. Another in the press is the voluminous correspondence between Mark Twain and his friend William Dean Howells.

The article went on to charge that if "official" America has to take notice of Mark Twain, then it does everything possible to suppress his social satire and "to make him up as a benevolent and simple-minded scoffer." The Russian writer is able, miraculously, to glimpse a political mechanism which no American is aware of. Is this goal of "official" America achieved through the Library of Congress? Congressional committees? The White House? The Supreme Court? The State Department? The F.B.I.? I am certain that American publishers—and anyone can become a publisher if he has the necessary funds: there is no license required, no fee, no examination—will be interested to learn that they are being supervised and suppressed after all.

The article also charged that my predecessors as editors of Mark Twain's Autobiography took "precautions" through "stifling editorial comments," as well as other means, to follow the "official" line. Yet it carefully failed to state what every student of Mark

Twain knows. The first editor, Albert Bigelow Paine, Twain's friend and literary executor, slavishly followed Twain's requests in the matter of the Autobiography and by no means undertook "stifling editorial comments." On the other hand Bernard DeVoto, the second editor, broke Twain's own injunctions in publishing his edition, and did so at the request of and with the approval of the Mark Twain Estate. I too broke Twain's injunctions as expressed in his manuscripts. And so if anyone is to blame for the slowness with which the Autobiography has been made public it is Mark Twain himself, who wanted it that way. The article also failed to state that far from suppressing anything, DeVoto freely published Mark Twain's "political" utterances of some thirty-five years previous: the attacks on Theodore Roosevelt, General Wood, Senator Clark, and others.

And now I must speak about my own edition. Mr. Bereznitsky wrote: "In 1959 Charles Neider found the precautions of his predecessors insufficient, and he decided without superfluous ceremony to 'shut Twain's trap,' blotting out from his edition all the notes mentioned above. This is a supreme example of scholarly ill faith and of that very political tendentiousness whose pretended absence certain American men of letters so love to boast on occasion." Yet the writer carefully failed to state that my position was made clear in my introduction and that it was simply this:

My intention was to make a volume designed for the general reader, not the scholar, a volume culled from the autobiographical manuscript as a whole, published as well as unpublished parts (for there were still sections unpublished). It was my hope to unburden the excellent parts from the dated, dull, trivial, and journalese sections of the work. And finally I hoped to concentrate less on opinion and second-hand recollection and more on the truly autobiographical, the more purely literary and the more characteristically humorous material. For me Mark Twain is essentially a great fabulist and not a great maker of political utterances. The reason that I omitted his attacks on the politicians was that I found them dull and dated. Besides, anyone who cared to look them up could easily do so by referring to the earlier editions, as well as to various editions of his works. What is more, I listed for my readers the

contents of the previous editions, so that ready comparisons could be made and my own omissions noted.

In my edition I included 30,000 to 40,000 words previously unpublished. Mr. Bereznitsky made light of these, yet they are more characteristically Mark Twain than his political utterances; and the fact is that through my efforts they are now disseminated among a wide public and not lying in the drawers of a library where only specialists might see them.

Finally, Mr. Bereznitsky wrote: "It is plain that the bitter prophecy which Twain made in the midst of work on his Autobiography in a letter to William Dean Howells is coming true." And then he quoted from the letter. I should like to quote the letter again, for to do so is relevant to an illumination of Mr. Bereznitsky's critical methods. "Tomorrow I mean to dictate a chapter which will get my heirs and assigns burned alive if they venture to print it this side of A.D. 2006—which I judge they won't. There'll be lots of such chapters if I live 3 or 4 years longer. The edition of A.D. 2006 will make a stir when it comes out. I shall be hovering around taking notice, along with other dead pals. You are invited."

Now this letter referred to the first of five chapters which Twain dictated on the subject of religion. On the title pages of two of the chapters is a penned note in his hand: "Not to be exposed to any eye until the edition of A.D. 2406. S.L.C." The meaning is clear. Writing to Howells, Twain dared his heirs and assigns to print the chapters a century hence. But on his own manuscripts he specifically prohibited his heirs and assigns from publishing the chapters until *five* centuries hence.

It is unfortunate that Mr. Bereznitsky did not feel the scholar's responsibility to inform his readers that all of the above information was available in my Introduction, and that he quoted only from the letter. If he had played fair with his readers it would not then have been so easy for him to imagine an "official" America as the origin of Mark Twain "suppressions." Nor would it have been quite so easy for him to belabor DeVoto and especially myself, both of whom have deliberately broken the great writer's injunctions in the belief that it is a public service to do so, without in any way being a disservice to his memory.

CHARLES NEIDER

*The Question Is Significantly More Profound**

A Letter to Charles Neider

Sir, the editor of the *Literary Gazette* has acquainted me with the letter in which you express disagreement with the content of my article, "Mark Twain on the Bed of Procrustes." I consider it my duty to answer you.

It was extraordinarily pleasant to me to learn that in America there is now noted a "fresh outburst of interest in the writer." I honestly believe that this outburst is not only long-lasting, but even continuous. Of course, an "outburst," as you naturally understand, can follow only a greater or lesser "extinction." Probably another great American writer, Dreiser, had just this tight period in mind when he observed in one of his articles, "Those few authentically great thinkers whom America has created—Poe, Whitman, Twain —are under a ban here." Probably also to this unfortunate period belongs the sadly renowned pronouncement of Congressman Joseph Shannon (a fully official figure, isn't he?), which called Twain "a forsaker of the interests of the South, a coward and a deserter," and demanded the abolition of all celebrations connected with the name of that writer.

You doubtless know that the best and the most popular of Mark Twain's works, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* was more than once fully subjected to "official" persecutions and bans. I take the liberty of referring to your colleague, one of the greatest contemporary American critics, Lionel Trilling. In his introduction to the regular edition of the renowned novel, which appeared under his editorship in 1948, Trilling wrote:

"Huckleberry Finn was once barred from certain libraries and schools for its alleged subversion of morality. The authorities had

*From *Literaturnaya Gazeta,* Moscow, December 12, 1959, p. 4.

in mind the book's endemic lying, the petty thefts, the denigrations of respectability and religion, the bad language and the bad grammar. We smile at that excessive care. . . ."

Lionel Trilling smiled, as I have mentioned, in 1948. I do not know whether he continued smiling in the following year, 1949, when the responsible "powers" crossed from the list of literature permitted for reading in the educational institutions of New York City another work of Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.* And then a year or two later the exclusion of that very *Huckleberry Finn* was demanded by none other than the now deceased Senator McCarthy. When in 1957 the Board of Education of New York City crossed the book about Huck from the books permitted for reading in elementary and junior schools of the city, the smile on the face of Mr. Trilling may well have changed into that very "grimace of loathing" with which you, in your own words, read my article. By the way, with just what expression did you watch the television version of *Huck Finn,* two years ago, in which, as the newspapers asserted, poor Jim was struck from the cast of characters? These same newspapers wrote, as I recall, that as a result, an "all-white entertainment" was made. I hope that the movie *Huckleberry Finn,* whose filming I learned of with pleasure from your letter, will not be like its televised forerunner.

It is true that you could smile and say that all these facts took place before the "outburst" you mentioned and that it is not worth while waving dead cats around, leaving Tom and Huck to occupy themselves with that. But right before me is the September issue of the English journal *Books and Bookmen.* It appeared six months after the publication of your book and it is apparently already in the period of the "outburst." On the thirty-second page under the general heading, "Banned," to my sincere sorrow, I saw the name of Twain's masterpiece in the strange company of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and the works of Henry Miller. Poor Huck, again (for the how-manyth time!), had not been permitted in the New York schools.

The basis of your objections, as I recall, involved in your eyes an insufficiently respectful attitude on my part toward the work which was performed by you as editor of the third edition of *The*

Autobiography of Mark Twain. No, you did great work—I would even say difficult work—as far as you are concerned. You quite successfully coped with this work as you wanted to. In your edition Twain actually appears as you are trying to present him. And you are trying to present him as a "great fabulist" (from your letter) or a master of "anecdote" (from your Introduction). But is the real Twain like that? Let us try to remember what he himself said about this. This citation is doubtless well known to you. I am taking it from your edition of his Autobiography:

". . . within the compass of these forty years wherein I have been playing professional humorist before the public, I have had for company seventy-eight other American humorists. . . . Why have they perished? Because they were *merely humorists.* [Here and in the later quotations the italics are mine. Y. B.] Humorists of the 'mere' sort cannot survive. . . . I have always preached. That is the reason that I have lasted thirty years. If the humor came of its own accord and uninvited I have allowed it a place in my sermon, but I was not writing the sermon for the sake of the humor."

The sermons about which Twain writes are just what constitute the social content of his work. This content is inseparable from the humor, just as the humor is inseparable from it. And you cut Twain's work in two and call the part which you don't like "dated, dull, and trivial." Yes, in your Introduction you listed just what you left out. "From the published parts I have omitted such matter as the . . . Morris incident . . . elongated remarks on Theodore Roosevelt, Andrew Carnegie, the plutocracy, and so on." If it were only a matter of remarks (or "attacks" as you call them in your letter) it might really not be worth while building up a case. But in these "remarks" or "attacks" are expressed Twain's feelings, thoughts, interests; and this all helps re-establish the writer's countenance, a goal, which from my point of view, should also be sought by the autobiography of a great writer.

Still, on this issue you maintain another point of view: "I hoped to concentrate less on opinion and second-hand recollection and more on the truly autobiographical . . . material." In short, only *events* interest you. Although you scorn "opinion," I shall take the liberty of reminding you of Twain's opinion on a question which

interests you, which he expressed in the same Autobiography. I must cite this passage from Paine's edition of 1924, since it is omitted from your edition. Speaking of the Morris incident (she tried to have an audience with the President and was driven from the White House and was treated coarsely by the police), Twain continues:

"There you have the facts. It is as I have said—for a number of days they have occupied almost the entire attention of the American nation. . . . It is this sort of thing which makes the right material for an autobiography." (You considered this material unfit for an autobiography. Y. B.) . . . "[A man's] life consists of his feelings and his interests, with here and there an incident apparently big or little to hang the feelings on."

I think you understand why I have offered this extensive quotation. Twain's political writings (it is hard for me to understand why you put the word "political" in quotation marks in your letter) are interesting not only because in them he "preaches," "proclaims," but also because they express his "feelings and his interests." Remember the words with which he begins his story of the annihilation by General Wood in the Philippines of six hundred men, women, and children of the Moro tribe (of course this passage is omitted from your edition):

"We will stop talking about my schoolmates of sixty years ago, for the present, and return to them later. They strongly interest me, and I am not going to leave them alone permanently. Strong as that interest is, it is for the moment pushed out of the way by an incident of to-day, which is still stronger."

That is what *interests* Twain. And it interests you to show that "Mark Twain was trying to amuse himself: that was his chief aim during the dictations." (Autobiography, Y. B.) But since it is quite, quite hard to prove that, you justify the numerous omissions and wilfulness in placing the materials by recourse to the fact that the volume was "designed for the general reader."

The composers of numerous "digests" which offer *David Copperfield* and *Anna Karenina* in a form fit for "digestion" are sick with the same disease: they consider that only the bare bones of events are fit to interest the simple reader, and "the feelings and interests"

which are "based" upon them are not in his power to digest. But it seems to me that the logical inconsistency of that part of your letter would strike even "a simple writer"; throwing light on my "critical methods," you refer to Twain's "demands" and "prohibitions." You claim credit for yourself and DeVoto for having "deliberately broken the great writer's injunctions," and right next to this, when it is a question of "the slowness with which the Autobiography has been made public," or of still unpublished chapters, you again refer to these same "demands" and "prohibitions." After all, if in some cases you break Twain's injunctions, it is hardly worth while to take refuge in it.

I would be sorry if you took all the above as only my comments, or even attacks, on your book, or your method of editorial work. No, the question is significantly more profound, and the dispute is going on actually not between you and me, but between two opposed tendencies in literary scholarship. One of them, which you represent, and which appears to be if not official, then at least the governing one in American literary scholarship, tries to show the social content of the work of this or that writer as something petty, secondary, incidental, and sometimes simply nonexistent. The representatives of this tendency try to present the great democrat and lover of life, Walt Whitman, as "a poet of death" and a "conservative" (the collection of essays, *Leaves of Grass One Hundred Years Later).* The representatives of this tendency try to reduce the meaning of the plays of the greatest contemporary American playwright, Arthur Miller, to "the history of a personal disorder and not to social disorganization" (Joseph T. Shipley). Every representative of this tendency has ignored the work of Dreiser in the thirties, and *An American Tragedy* appears in their interpretation like a private occurrence in the life of a certain Clyde Griffiths. Understandably, no one will begin to assert that there are no representatives of other tendencies in literary criticism in America, tendencies trying to clarify the phenomenon of literature in all its integrity and complexity. In our press, for example, there has already been given a detailed evaluation of P. Foner's interesting book, *Mark Twain: Social Critic.*

In conclusion, I would like to make it known to you that of those

thirty or forty thousand words which you first included in your edition, and toward which in your words I "behaved scornfully" (on what basis you reached that conclusion is a riddle to me), a significant part was published in our press (in the magazine *Crocodile,* with an edition of 1,200,000 copies, and in the Estonian newspaper, *Hammer and Sickle)* even before the appearance of your book, on the basis of the preliminary publication in *Harper's Magazine*. I mention this to show you how great is our interest in the work of Mark Twain, what joy every new publication of his text furnishes us, how dear to us are all the manifestations of his genius, and what incomprehension and protest is called from us by any attempt to narrow and present in an impoverished light his wonderful and many-faceted countenance.

I hope that the circumstance that I address this letter directly to you, and not through President Eisenhower, will not be taken by anyone as a display of my disrespect toward him, but merely as a reluctance to have recourse for the solution of unofficial literary disputes to the intermediation of highly placed official figures.

Sincerely yours,
YAN BEREZNITSKY

(Translated by Robert L. Belknap)

[*Reply*]*

MR. BEREZNITSKY'S chief argument in his criticism of August 18th was that I omitted in my edition of Mark Twain's Autobiography parts which he, Mr. Bereznitsky, would like to see included; and that I did so in response either to an "official" line or to an "official" climate. Of course theoretically it is preferable to publish the whole of the Autobiography in one comprehensive edition, but what is theoretically desirable is not always practical in a practical world, as Mr. Bereznitsky will no doubt admit. I am delighted to see in Mr. Bereznitsky's second criticism, of December 12th, a tacit admission that no official point of view regarding Mark Twain

*Airmailed to *Literaturnaya Gazeta,* Moscow, from New York, December 21, 1959. Publication declined.

exists in America; also I am delighted to find that he recognizes the existence of a multitude of literary viewpoints in the United States.

Mr. Bereznitsky's complaint now consists of the fact that I did the job differently from the way he would have done it. If it is any comfort to him, I also did the job differently from the way other Mark Twain scholars—American ones—would have done it. Mr. Bereznitsky would naturally like me to see the matter in his way, and to handle it in his way. But because of different circumstances I see it differently. These circumstances are both linguistic and aesthetic, and I should like to say a few words concerning them.

Mr. Bereznitsky arrives at the conclusion, somewhat to my astonishment, that it is only "events" which interest me in Mark Twain's Autobiography. This is certainly news to me, for events are perhaps what I am least interested in in the Autobiography. In the first place the "events" as Mark Twain states them are not always accurate; in the second place Albert Bigelow Paine, in his three-volume biography of Twain, takes care of the "events" quite well. What I am interested in primarily are psychology, humor, emotions, reflections and reminiscences—all those matters which cannot easily be referred to as didactic—and I am interested in these because it happens that when he is dealing with them Mark Twain is at his best as a stylist and creator.

Despite these facts, Mr. Bereznitsky is unfortunately in error to think that I knowingly slight the didactic side of Mark Twain or wilfully underestimate the social content of his work. If DeVoto had not published his 1940 volume, if the materials in it had been lying in their pristine state awaiting an editor, I would have been delighted to publish them; I would have seized on them as valuable documents of a great writer. But DeVoto *had* published them—less than twenty years previously; his book had been widely distributed; and I could not see the wisdom, under the circumstances, of repeating so soon after their publication material which does not strike me as being central to an autobiography. As I understood it, my function as an editor was to make publicly available as much of the unpublished Autobiography as possible, as well as to select the finest sections of it (from the aesthetic, not the social view) and

arrange them all in chronological order. I worked in the belief, which I still possess, that the material contained the possibility of an American classic, and I aimed at nothing less than a classic standard and form.

In our discussion it is well to remember that I regard an autobiography as capable of being a work of art, and that I come to it with certain aesthetic expectations, even requirements. It is true that I read autobiographies for other reasons also, especially if they are in translation: I want to know something about the person and his period. But in my own language I make demands which I do not make of works in translation. There is the whole question of language to be considered, and beyond that of style, beauty, and form. The didactic Mark Twain, particularly the journalistic and didactic Mark Twain, frankly seems to me too often strident, or flat, or humorless—I am speaking chiefly of language. (I have no way of knowing how such passages come through in Russian translation.)

I suspect that many authors enjoy an undeserved rank in translation, and that this rule works generally in inverse proportion to the original beauty, depending of course to some extent on the talent of the translator. Great stylists can seem empty in translation, whereas third-rate writers can seem quite grand. For me—and there are many novelists and critics in America with the same orientation—there is a beauty of language, a nobility or harshness of language, which is closely bound to great work and that is inseparable from it. A thought or an emotion or a bit of psychology does not exist in itself but through and with the language which it forms and which forms it. The aesthetic element for me is a primary one when it comes to literature. I am content to believe that it is the first function and value of the artist to perceive and to create works of beauty—that is what he specializes in, from my view. There are few first-rate scientists who are also first-rate political thinkers or economists; and I believe that there are few literary artists who are such. I do not think the less of Mark Twain for his didactic works; I admire him for them. But just as his didactic works do not heighten for me the greatness of a book like *Huckleberry Finn,* so it is that the didactic parts of his Autobiog-

raphy do not for me heighten the more psychological, humorous, and nostalgic parts.

Perhaps I should put the matter in another way. If, as it sometimes happens, the didactic parts are as fine stylistically as the others, then I accept them with the same whole-hearted delight as I accept the others. It seems to me that style, like a gesture or a facial expression, is a key to the profundity of a man's beliefs and emotions. If a writer like Dreiser is not capable of a great style that is another matter, of course; one judges him by his own scale —I am speaking always of the original language. Mark Twain *is* capable of a great style and I have selected those passages of his Autobiography which I believe show him at his pitch of true stylistic greatness, which always turns out to be something larger than mere "style" as one might casually think of style—style the envelope rather than the true voice.

Among the finest didactic chapters of the Autobiography are the five chapters on religion which my book unfortunately did not include, and which still await the first fine light of publication. It was painful to me to have to exclude them, but Mr. Bereznitsky will recall that in my Introduction I placed the responsibility for their exclusion where it rightfully belongs, on Mark Twain's daughter. She has the legal right to keep them from being published, a right her father conferred on her in his will, and no person or agency in America can force her to publish them. I said in my Introduction that unlike DeVoto I do not assume responsibility for all of the omissions. It was therefore incorrect of Mr. Bereznitsky to accuse me of an inconsistency: of "boasting" of having broken Mark Twain's injunctions on the one hand, while using those same injunctions as a defense. For my part, at this late date I would have broken every injunction, in the honest belief that that is what Mark Twain would also have done. Anyhow, it is Mr. Bereznitsky who is inconsistent, for I was making not a personal but a public point: I was saying that it is Mark Twain's injunctions, followed in some instances, not followed in others, which account for the slowness with which the Autobiography has appeared, and not the "official" American line which Mr. Bereznitsky originally imagined to exist.

As for his comparison of my edition with digests of such books as *David Copperfield* and *Anna Karenina,* let me point out that this is hardly an accurate or fruitful comparison. These books are novels, not works of nonfiction; they were published during their authors' lifetime and under their authors' supervision; and they are both finished works. In the Introduction to my edition I stated my belief that Mark Twain, had he lived longer, would have worked over the materials of his Autobiography—I stress the fact that they are materials and not the finished product—until he had obtained a book which was unified and controlled. It seems to me pointless to accuse me of belonging to the "digest" school of editors when I am after all dealing not with a finished product but with more or less raw material for such a product. A better comparison would be, say, with the voluminous diaries of Tolstoy.

I would not like to leave the impression, however, that I am constantly in disagreement with Mr. Bereznitsky. Together with him I deplore the banning of *Huckleberry Finn* and any other of Mark Twain's books from the public schools of New York City; the silly comments by a former Congressman on matters he was not competent to judge, however inconspicuous that Congressman may have been in public life (as Shannon apparently was); the comments of the overconspicuous Senator McCarthy (who, by the way, before his death was the subject of a resolution of censure in the United States Senate, and the consequent object of ostracism, as a result of his notorious behavior); and similar instances of literary and cultural stupidity or blindness.

That the question of translation is a complex and difficult one is brought home to me as a result of our exchange of opinions. In response to Mr. Bereznitsky's charge that "official" America tries to "forget" Mark Twain, I said, "I find it difficult to read this without a wry smile." How sad it is that a mistranslation should have hurt his feelings. My "wry smile" became a "grimace of loathing." A wry smile—at least my wry smile, dear sirs—has no loathing in it and no grimace. It contains irony, but often also a certain sympathy. And my remarks that Mr. Bereznitsky "makes light of" the 30,000 to 40,000 words of the Autobiography which I published for the first time became in translation "behaves with scorn."

Again I am saddened, for I am sure that Mr. Bereznitsky was not scornful. "Makes light of" was my way of describing what he said about the new parts—"few, inoffensive trifles" is what he called them. It would be so much easier for this exchange if we were both using the same language, which for obvious reasons we cannot do.

In closing this communication I should like to say how happy I am to note the change in Mr. Bereznitsky's tone between his first and his second criticisms. The tone of the first was harsh and accusatory; the tone of the second shows a genuine effort to comprehend my point of view, and is not only friendly but at one point even highly complimentary. If we can understand each other better through this exchange of opinions—and I am sure we will—the exchange will have had some value beyond its immediate subject.

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In the fall of 1959 Charles Neider, editor of *The Autobiography of Mark Twain,* and Yan Bereznitsky, critic for the Moscow *Literary Gazette,* official organ of the Union of Soviet Writers, locked horns in a history-making literary debate. Bereznitsky charged that Neider had omitted from his book Mark Twain's caustic observations on American social and political life, and that the omissions were part of a literary self-censorship meekly accepted by American critics. "Normally I do not reply to criticisms of my books," writes Charles Neider in his Introduction to this booklet. "This particular one, however, offered a special and complex challenge. . . . It struck at me through the society of which I am a part. . . . Consequently I decided to take some action."

Through Premier Khrushchev's intervention Neider's reply was published in full in the *Literary Gazette,* and he thus became the first American writer to be given an opportunity to air his views, uncensored, in a Soviet publication. This booklet presents the complete text of the exchange of letters which made front-page news throughout the country. It contains Bereznitsky's long rejoinder to Neider's letter and Neider's final rebuttal, which was not printed in the *Literary Gazette.*

This literary exchange may well prove to be a landmark in Soviet American relations, pointing the way to a freer cultural communication between the two countries.

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